

Once Over Lightly

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REDUCE FOOD-CHOKING RISKS FOR YOUR KIDS

Today's subject isn't something that I take lightly, despite the name of this column. Just thought I'd warn you that I wanted to use this space to alert another generation about potential food hazards.

In my early days as a food writer, I researched and wrote an article about foods that were choking hazards for small children. A week or two after it appeared, a Morning Call reader who didn't give me his name, called with a message I will never forget.

He told me his child had choked on a hot dog. Although the child didn't die, he said, "She might not have suffered permanent brain damage if we had seen an article like that before."

His words stayed with me. When I had my own children, they didn't even know what a whole hot dog looked like until they were nearly teenagers. I chopped everything into finely diced nibbles.

When a recent release from the Center for Science in the Public Interest arrived, I decided it was time to remind parents about choking hazards and to discuss a new CSPA initiative to get the food industry to place safety notices on hot dogs, candies, grapes and other common choking hazards.

"A simple notice instructing a parent to chop food into small pieces or refrain from serving certain foods to young children could save many kids' lives," says Bruce Silverglade, the organization's legal-affairs director. "This is such an easy way to prevent so many tragic deaths and injuries."

U.S. Reps. **Mike Honda** (D-Calif.) and Mike Ferguson (R-N.J.) are sponsoring the bipartisan Food Choking Prevention Act after young children in their districts choked to death on candies or hot dogs. The bill would encourage the Food and Drug Administration to develop food-labeling regulations for products that pose choking hazards to young children.

The most important thing, when you're feeding your children or your grandchildren, is that some popular "kid" foods can be dangerous despite the fact they may seem like healthy or harmless snacks and treats.

Among the foods that pose the greatest choking dangers to young children are hot dogs, sausages, candies, gum, grapes, apples, carrots, marshmallows, popcorn, raisins, cheese cubes, peanut butter and nuts.

At least one child dies from choking on food every five days in the United States and more than 10,000 children are taken to hospital emergency rooms each year for food-choking injuries. Children under age 5 are at greatest risk for choking injury and death, according to the CSPI report.

Some companies already are voluntarily including choking safety notices on the labels of some of their products. "These companies have responsibly decided on their own to warn parents of choking hazards," says Aliza Sperling, CSPI staff attorney. "If they can do it, why can't their competitors? We urge other companies to protect children from food-choking dangers," she says.

Products that currently include choking safety notices on their packages are Kraft's Louis Rich Franks and Oscar Mayer Franks; Ballpark Singles hot dogs; Kraft's Natural Cheese Cubes, Creme Savers hard candy and Lifesavers Fusions; Hershey's Jolly Rancher hard candy; Mars' Starburst, and Nestle's Wonka Gobstoppers.

Among the products that do not provide safety notices but are on CSPI's wish list to do so are Armour Star hot dogs, Nathan's hot dogs, Kraft's Louis Rich Sausage, Jimmy Dean Sausage, Hershey's Milk Dugs, ConAgra's Orville Redenbacher popcorn, Unilever's Skippy peanut butter and Mars' Peanut M&M's. CSPI has written to these and other manufacturers of more than 300 brands of hot dogs, candy, popcorn and other foods to urge them to voluntarily add safety notices to their products.

"Requiring safety labels that inform parents how to serve certain foods to children under age 5 is a modest first step toward reducing the number of young children who die each year from choking on food," says Dr. Gary Smith, director of the Center for Injury Research and Policy at Columbus Childrens' Hospital and the co-author of a major study on food-choking hazards.

He adds, "The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission has labeling requirements for toys that pose a choking hazard to young children, yet what is more likely to go into a child's mouth -- a toy or food?"

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